

Tanya Izzard

'E.M. Delafield's Lesbian Sideshow'

Delivered at The Popular and The Middlebrow: Women's Writing 1880–1940, 12 April 2012, Newcastle University, UK

The 1920s was a rich time for representations of lesbians in middlebrow fiction. This is in part because, as Nicola Humble has argued, it was possible for readers of such novels to, “simultaneously know and not know”, that characters were lesbian, because characterisations were implicit, and established through allusion and intertextual reference.<sup>1</sup> This strategy allowed novelists to establish protagonists who can be both read **and** not read as lesbian; the characterisation is in part dependent on the reader's willingness to interpret coded references, and to follow the signs and hints that connoted lesbian subjectivity. Middlebrow writers could construct lesbian characterisations by drawing on connotative indicators of lesbianism; these included perceived masculinity, feminist beliefs, and educational prowess. These indicators emerged from sexological and psychological definitions and gained currency through more popular writings such as those of Marie Stopes. For the presumed majority heteronormative reader, these connotations could be safely ignored if they were recognised at all, since the putative lesbian meaning could always be masked by other, superficially obvious, interpretations. Delafield's novel *Consequences*, published in 1919, makes exemplary use of the allusive construction of lesbian meaning. Her protagonist Alex can be read as lesbian, but she can also be read as an unsuccessful player in the late Victorian marriage market who succumbs to religious enthusiasm.

However, after the obscenity trial of the *Well of Loneliness* in 1928, lesbian meanings became more explicit. As Laura Doan has argued, the trial helped to construct a public understanding of lesbian identity which was strongly associated with Radclyffe Hall's persona and lifestyle; women who lived with other women, or who possessed physical or psychological attributes deemed to be masculine, could be firmly identified as lesbian.<sup>2</sup> As Doan explains, “The possibility of denial – so convenient for those who knew but preferred not to – began to slip away”.<sup>3</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* is not only a watershed in terms of the visibility and legibility of the lesbian, but also in terms of how lesbians could be represented in middlebrow texts. Writers could no longer rely on allusion and inference to hint at the sexuality of their characters, since this approach depended on the “possibility of denial”. Lesbian protagonists, even those constructed through connotation, also risked bringing the work to the attention of the censor. In the 1930s middlebrow writers who wished to engage with the topic of lesbianism developed new approaches, including the possibility of using the newly visible lesbian character as an object of humour or satire.

In *Challenge to Clarissa*, Delafield deals with a protagonist who can be read as masculine – and therefore lesbian – by establishing what I have termed a *lesbian sideshow*: two minor characters who carry the lesbian meaning within the text and distract from the possibility that the eponymous Clarissa is lesbian. In this paper, I argue that this sideshow element allows the novel to respect the norms of middlebrow fiction by avoiding overt statements about sexuality and their associated political meanings. However, I also demonstrate how Delafield works flexibly within the middlebrow category to suggest that a lesbian relationship might be positive and equal in significance to heterosexual marriage, and thus to imply that such relationships merit social approval. My reading of Delafield's novel contributes to the definition of the middlebrow category, showing how it accommodates political meaning that is both deeply traditional and conservative **and** potentially radical.

*Challenge to Clarissa*, published in 1930 shortly after the *Well of Loneliness* prosecution, is a complex comedy of manners, in which the nouveau riche and autocratic Clarissa seeks to prevent the marriage of her son Lucien to her stepdaughter Sophie, through control of the family money. Clarissa is eventually thwarted by Sophie's grandmother, a French Princess, who

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bribes Clarissa’s second husband Fitzmaurice to persuade Clarissa to allow the marriage. Fitzmaurice achieves this by threatening to leave Clarissa; he is Clarissa’s one weak spot, and she yields. Elinor Fish and Olivia King are minor characters in the novel; Olivia King is the sister of Clarissa’s land agent and they together live near Clarissa’s country house. They are never seen in Clarissa’s company in the novel, although they do meet the Princess, Sophie and Lucien. Elinor is an Oxford-educated, cultured woman, entirely uninterested in her personal appearance, enthusiastic to the point of brashness and inclined to be indiscreet. Olivia is more reticent, elegantly dressed and intelligent, and the author of several successful novels. Elinor contributes in a small way to the advancement of the plot, helping to ensure Sophie meets her grandmother, and driving the Princess to the appointment at which she will offer her bribe. There are a large number of similar minor characters in *Challenge to Clarissa* who function partly as comedic and partly to move along the action. Others are simply foils for the major characters: Olivia King’s unfortunate sister-in-law seems to be in the novel only to be compared – unfavourably – to other women in terms of her dress and personal appearance. In a comedy of manners well supplied with minor characters, what is the function of Elinor Fish and Olivia King? I argue that they constitute a sideshow element, distracting the reader from the possibility of perceiving the powerful and potentially masculine Clarissa as lesbian.

Clarissa is feminine in appearance, but the narrative exposes the inauthenticity of this. Her mouth is “outlined to an outrageously improbable Cupid’s bow” but her face is, quote, “hard, shrewd and full of an essential coarseness”.<sup>4</sup> Clarissa’s defining characteristic, essential to the plot of the novel, is her tyranny. This is expressed through her control of money and property and articulated in a repeated refrain: quote “This house is mine, and the London house is mine, and the whole of the money is mine [...] they [that is, her family] owe everything in the world to me”.<sup>5</sup> Clarissa’s power, control of her money and autocratic management of her family place her in the traditional position of a dominant patriarch. All these masculine characteristics might reasonably constitute a lesbian characterisation. This reading would complicate the plot of the novel, which relies on Clarissa’s genuine love for her second husband. To avoid this interpretation, Delafield creates more overt lesbian meaning among her minor characters.

Delafield’s approach to the representation of the relationship between Miss Fish and Miss King is considerably more direct than her characterisation of Alex in *Consequences*. However, elements of the middlebrow construction of sexuality as something to be known and not known persist. She introduces the characters with a convoluted disavowal of a sexual aspect to their relationship:

The understanding between these two ladies had survived the experiment of a joint household, several trips abroad, and even, as Miss Fish resentfully observed, the fuss about *The Well of Loneliness*, that had put so many normal and respectable single women under the wholly unnecessary strain of being obliged to consider the breath of scandal with regard to relationships into which such a thing had not hitherto entered.<sup>6</sup>

As this sentence indicates, middlebrow ambiguity is difficult to maintain in the context of much greater legibility of lesbianism. *The Well of Loneliness* is an explicit intertextual reference that has only one clear meaning, and acts as a shorthand indicator of lesbianism. By referring to the book directly, Delafield opens up the possibility of a lesbian relationship between the two women within a sentence that, on the surface at least, seeks to close down any such possibility. The complexities of this sentence develop this possibility further. It is the threat of scandal, rather than of sexuality, that has entered into relationships and caused strain: that is, the possibility of open knowledge, rather than ambiguous supposition, of a sexual relationship between two women. Elinor and Olivia may belong to the group of “normal and respectable single women” who, thanks to the reception of Radclyffe Hall’s work, may now be thought of as

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lesbian; or they may simply be lesbians. The apparent disavowal is nothing of the kind, but rather a sly hint to the reader that their relationship is in fact a lesbian one. It also exemplifies the difficulty for the middlebrow text of the transition from connotative to overt depictions of lesbianism.

Delafield goes on to construct this relationship in much the same way as she does heterosexual marriages in her other novels. To describe Elinor, the narrative frequently moves to Olivia's viewpoint, which is often critical; she feels that, quote "Elinor Fish was more trouble than she was worth", she warns her against social indiscretions, and criticises her dress sense.<sup>7</sup> Socialising with Elinor is not always a comfortable activity for the novelist: "the exultant Miss Fish [...] always took a generous pride in her friend's achievements, and was, indeed, sometimes too apt to make Olivia feel like the rabbit of a conjurer's trick."<sup>8</sup> However, the women are more compatible in many ways than Delafield's husbands and wives: Olivia is, "almost the only person who could meet Miss Fish upon an equality", in terms of intellect and experience;<sup>9</sup> they are also physically well matched, as, "[h]ardly anyone ever walked as fast, or as far, as Miss Fish, but Olivia came nearest to it".<sup>10</sup> Their little sub-plot within the novel details Olivia's growing frustration with Elinor's, quote "noisy excitement"; her tendency to, quote "thrust [her]self into the affairs of strangers uninvited", causes the women to quarrel.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the novel, however, Olivia begins to wonder if she is, "not always sufficiently appreciative of Elinor's good qualities".<sup>12</sup> In the context of Delafield's other fiction, the narrative of Olivia's emotional response to Elinor resembles that of other unsatisfied wives, such as Laura in *The Way Things Are*<sup>13</sup> or Mary Morgan in *Gay Life*,<sup>14</sup> although the representation is more deliberately humorous and less serious, and ultimately points to a more positive future life together. This resemblance to Delafield's other narratives of marriage supports a reading of their relationship as analogous to marriage and imparts to it the significance of a marital relationship.

The characterisation of Elinor Fish develops the markers of lesbian characters used in 1920s middlebrow fiction. As well as being educated at Oxford, she has written a number of unpublished works, including one discussing "Some New Aspects of Feminism";<sup>15</sup> she therefore fits into the category of educated, feminist women associated with lesbianism in earlier middlebrow novels. Elinor's rejection of the trappings of femininity, which is contrasted with the feminine appearance of the Princess and of Olivia herself, is another middlebrow indicator of lesbianism.<sup>16</sup> Elinor's masculine characteristics are mainly physical in nature: she has a deep voice, walks with a, "military swing of her shoulders", stands "with her feet planted rather far apart, in a manly way", and is often to be seen with a walking-stick, which she is seen "wagging [...] humorously" and using to "stri[k]e the ground vigorously".<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on the physical nature of Elinor's masculinity reinforces ideas of her physically expressed sexuality, underpinning her probable lesbianism, and deflecting attention from the psychically masculine qualities of Clarissa. As well as reflecting earlier representations of lesbianism through her education and her feminism, Elinor Fish also actually shares her house and her life with a woman. Elinor and Olivia therefore function effectively as a lesbian sideshow in the novel, drawing any attribution of lesbianism away from Clarissa.

What, then, is the impact of the lesbian sideshow on the feminist meaning of *Challenge to Clarissa*? The novel does not easily yield up a feminist viewpoint. Clarissa herself is an entirely negative representation of a powerful woman, despite her personal strength, vitality and independence. There is a class-based valorisation of the type of female power that attaches to the Princess; the nouveau riche Clarissa is described as "vulgar" and "hard" while the Princess is invariably "charming", "courteous" and occasionally "pure *ancien regime*", stressing her aristocratic heritage. The Princess, of course, achieves her aim using Clarissa's usual methods, disingenuously commenting after she has successfully bribed Fitzmaurice that, "money [...] is really of very little use", although it should be noted that she has wilfully impoverished herself to ensure

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Sophie’s marriage to Lucien.<sup>18</sup> The main feminist argument of the text is that of *Consequences* and several other Delafield novels: young women like Sophie should be able to choose their own husbands and not be hustled into a suitable marriage by their parents. Elinor Fish is a supporting voice in the matter of Sophie’s marriage: quote “I can’t believe that your Sophie should ever have allowed herself to become engaged to any other man”.<sup>19</sup> But the representation of Elinor and Olivia’s relationship does not support the argument for greater freedom for young women in any obvious way. Nor does it represent a realistic alternative for Sophie; if she does not marry Lucien, she will surely marry her stepmother’s choice of suitable young man. It could, however, be a realistic alternative for some of Delafield’s readership. Such a reading is supported by the broadly positive representation of Elinor, who is invariably good-humoured and liked by the other characters; and the almost unfailingly positive characterisation of the well-dressed, socially adept Olivia. Late in the novel, the two women hold a party to celebrate Sophie and Lucien’s engagement. In their last scene in the novel, at the end of a successful evening, Olivia leaves the door open so that departing guests can hear Elinor’s delighted endorsement of their joint endeavour, a gesture which sites their relationship in an open, positive context. But a reading of their relationship as positive is complicated by the tendency of Miss Fish to conform to stereotypical characterisations of spinsters in the novels of this period, by Olivia’s frustrations and lack of satisfaction, and by the comic sideshow function of the couple in the novel, all of which mean that the narrative retains an ambiguous position about the topic of lesbianism. The text yields a subversive suggestion that homosocial relationships may be a positive choice for women outside the class of Sophie or the Princess – and within the class of Delafield’s readership – but Delafield does not make an overt argument in favour of such relationships.

In *Challenge to Clarissa*, the lesbian relationship is included mostly for its comedic value but it brings the added benefit of ensuring other characters can be read as heterosexual. There is no particular reason for Elinor and Olivia to be in the novel except to function as a lesbian sideshow. But the way Delafield treats her lesbian characters, however amusing, constructs a subversive argument for the seriousness and validity of lesbian relationships, even though these may be problematic for the women concerned and complicated by the couple’s position as comic characters. The lesbian sideshow in this novel functions to ensure that lesbian meaning, now so legible, is not carried by central characters, which would risk censorship; and it advances, by stealth or accident, a feminist argument about the sexual choices available to women and the potential for happiness outside heterosexual marriage, alongside its primary feminist argument about freedom of choice for young women. It also functions as a literary device which allows the text to maintain readability for the majority of the middlebrow readership, who can be presumed to be heteronormative; for the alert and sympathetic reader, however, detection of the device may also contribute to readerly pleasure in the text.

The novel also contributes to a development of the general characterisations of lesbians in fiction; earlier fictional representations, as Gabriele Griffin argues, “create an image of them as *the only one* in their community, as isolated individuals [...] suffering and essentially unfulfilled, intended to arouse pity rather than condemnation”.<sup>20</sup> By focusing, in a minor but positive way, on professionally successful or financially comfortable lesbians in relationships and accepted within communities, this text helps develop a literary alternative to the tragic lesbian martyr of 1920s fiction, exemplified by Stephen Gordon herself. By continuing to engage with potentially provocative notions of sexuality, Delafield’s novel supports a reading of the middlebrow category as flexible enough to accommodate positive representations of lesbian relationships even within in a text concerned chiefly with a traditional marriage plot.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p232

<sup>2</sup> Doan, Laura L, *Fashioning Sapphism: the Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p193

<sup>3</sup> Doan, Laura L, *Fashioning Sapphism: the Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p193

<sup>4</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) pp6-9

<sup>5</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p286

<sup>6</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p109

<sup>7</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) pp120-122, p306

<sup>8</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p116

<sup>9</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p110

<sup>10</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p114

<sup>11</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p239, p249

<sup>12</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p307

<sup>13</sup> Delafield, E.M., *The Way Things Are* (London: Macmillan, 1927)

<sup>14</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Gay Life* (London: Macmillan, 1933)

<sup>15</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p110

<sup>16</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) pp114-115

<sup>17</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p121, p240, p248, p249

<sup>18</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p289

<sup>19</sup> Delafield, E.M., *Challenge to Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1931) p248

<sup>20</sup> Griffin, Gabriele, *Heavenly Love? Lesbian images in twentieth-century women's writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) p11